

## **A Rebel Account of the Siege of Vicksburg**

### **CURIOUS PARTICULARS**

The Edinburgh *Scotsman* publishes an interesting account of the siege of Vicksburg, written by an English officer in the rebel service, Lieutenant Underhill, aide-de-camp of the rebel general S. D. Lee, from which we take the following curious and interesting particulars. It will be seen that he throws the blame of defeat on General Johnston.

### **THE BATTLE OF CHAMPION HILLS**

“After long and harassing marches over dusty and hilly roads, under a burning sun, and with very scanty rations, the Confederate troops, wearied almost to death, bivouacked at 1 A. M. on Saturday, May 16, in a cornfield, some five miles beyond Edward’s depot, a station on the Vicksburg and Jackson Railroad, and about twenty-nine miles from the former place. In about two hours after bivouacking, viz., about 3 A. M., a courier arrived from General Johnston, with a dispatch to the effect that he was marching towards us at the head of ten thousand men; that we were to effect a junction with him at any risk, and that for that purpose General Pemberton was to retire a few miles and take up and hold a position which was designated.

“The wearied army was aroused and put in motion, and the wagons were started on their way back towards Vicksburg. By 8 A. M. the Confederate army under General Pemberton, consisting of General Stevenson’s division (four brigades, equal 6,000 men), Bowen’s division (two brigades, equal 4,000 men,) and Loring’s division (two brigades, equal 5,000 men,) (in all say 15,000,) had taken position in line of battle on the crest of an ampitheatre of hills, the troops facing towards the converse side. This semicircular line crossed, and of course commanded, the Raymond road, whereon the federals were known to be in force. Upon this road, accordingly, about 8 A. M., heavy skirmishing commenced, and was vigorously sustained along the whole line held by Stevenson’s division until about 10 A. M., when the enemy advanced in force on the left division, and consequently on the brigade of General Lee.

“The policy of the enemy seemed to be continually to flank the left of our army. As their purpose became gradually developed, corresponding movements were made by the Confederate Generals. Attack after attack, and charge after charge, was successfully repulsed by the Confederate soldiery, notwithstanding the great disparity of the contending force, until it became evident that without reinforcements it was impossible to hold the line and protect the flank of Stevenson’s division. Despatch after despatch having been sent, representing the state of affairs, was replied to by promise after promise of aid, none of which were kept.

“At last the crisis came, the federals, massing all of their forces upon the left, charged, in column of three divisions. Our troops stood manfully up to their work, throwing in a withering fire upon

the advancing enemy. The first and second line broke, but the third, sweeping steadily on, overwhelmed our wearied and now much weakened regiments, and in a moment the scene was one of utmost confusion. Here and there a group could be seen fighting hand to hand, but by far the majority were retreating in disorder through the magnolia groves in their rear.

“A prolonged and hearty cheer, or rather yell, to the right of Stevenson’s retreating division – followed by hurried movements among the federal forces – broke upon the ear. It was Bowen’s Missourians charging and driving the enemy, whom they repulsed with heavy loss; moreover capturing our guns which we had earlier lost. This movement infused new vigor into the discouraged southerners, and they were rallied and led to charge with partial success. All our artillery was once more recaptured, and our original line having been regained, was once more held by Stevenson’s four brigades, who poured a deadly fire into the confused and disordered enemy. I have heard the most competent judges affirm, and federal generals admit, that the Yankees were at this juncture so thoroughly demoralized that, had Loring’s fresh troops been thrown in, they would have turned the tide of the fight, and the victory would have been ours.

“But the golden opportunity was neglected; Loring’s division lay idle on the right, where they never fired a shot. The federals were rallied; their reserves were brought up; they charged again with desperate determination; our musketry rattled, their bayonets gleamed, the two lines closed, there was a moment of intense and unbearable suspense, of wild hope and fervent trust, but, alas! for the Confederate cause, without foundation; for the next instant, the whole Confederate line, bursting into retreat, quitted the field in disorder, leaving the enemy in possession of the field, of all the dead and the wounded, of several hundred prisoners, who after gallantly fighting to the last, were surrounded and taken; and last, though not least, of twenty pieces of artillery; in fact, of almost every gun that pertained to Stevenson’s division. I should here remark that, had it been possible, our guns would before the crisis have been moved off the ground; but the wooded nature of the line precluded this, and moreover the enemy’s fire had killed nearly all our horses.

“The retreat now became a disgraceful sight; a complete *saue qui peut* [‘Save yourself’], until, thanks to the almost superhuman exertion of Generals Lee, Barton, &c., order was in a measure restored. General Pemberton now directed a general retreat towards our intrenchments at Big Black, Loring’s division taking one way, Pemberton, heading the remainder of Stevenson’s and Bowen’s divisions, back the other. The victorious enemy pressed hard upon our retreating column, burning every house, every hut, as they swept along, until at dark our vanquished, discomfited army proceeded to snatch a few hours’ sleep behind our intrenchments at Big Black. These intrenchments having been intended to protect the trestle work of the railroad bridge, were of course on the further side of the river from Vicksburg. The Confederate forces were thus on the same side of the river as their enemy, and had the river in their rear. The federal pickets had been posted around the intrenched position of the Confederate army, so as completely to bar ingress and egress on their side.

“At daybreak on Sunday, May 17, all the wagons and stores having safely crossed, and being well on the way for Vicksburg, Vaughn’s brigade of Tennesseans, fresh from camp, with Bowen’s brave Missourians, and twenty pieces of artillery were left to hold the intrenchments, and the remainder of the army was withdrawn to the other bank. Fighting commenced at about six. The enemy’s repeated charges were invariably repulsed with heavy loss, until about nine o’clock a sudden and unaccountable panic seized on Vaughn’s Tennesseans, and they *en masse* ran from their works, over which the enemy instantly swarmed in immense force. By far the greater part of Vaughn’s brigade fell prisoners to the enemy, as did also many of the Missourians, who, being now attacked from two sides, found themselves unable to maintain their ground, and accordingly rejoined the main army, the enemy gaining and retaining possession of upwards of twenty pieces of artillery. Another defeat for General Pemberton – another victory for General Grant.

“ General Pemberton now ordered an immediate retreat to our intrenchments round Vicksburg, which was at once entered upon. The railroad bridge and trestle work were set on fire, and the destruction of the military pontoon bridge immediately commenced. Snyder’s Mill, twelve miles from Vicksburg – a position which protected the right flank of Vicksburg – was evacuated. Some of the guns were removed, and the remainder destroyed, and the garrison, consisting of Forney’s division (More’s and Hebert’s brigades) was marched into town. Snyder’s was a naturally strong position on the Yazoo river, protected on either flank by impregnable swamps, and its fortifications consisted of some very heavy batteries and a strong raft chained across the river. By three P. M., the army was safe within the intrenchments of Vicksburg, save one regiment of General Lee’s brigade, the Twenty-third Alabama (Colonel Beck), which in the confusion had been overlooked, and had remained on this side of the Big Black, concealed amid the tree and undergrowth.

### **GRANT’S FIRST ASSAULT**

“The first night under arms in the trenches was a very quiet one. On Tuesday the enemy appeared in force on the left of our line and, rushing on, attempted to carry our works by storm. As good fortune would have it, they selected our strongest position and our choicest and freshest troops for their attack. The Yankees charged valiantly on the Mississippi and Louisiana troops of Baldwin’s and Sharp’s brigades (Smith’s division), and were everywhere repulsed with frightful loss. They never got nearer than within say two hundred yards of our works, but they left the ground literally blue with their killed and wounded. Our lines by evening completely invested. After the first two weeks General Grant, apparently despairing of carrying our works by storm, set about making regular approaches, which were pushed with the utmost zeal and assiduity. By the fortieth day the enemy were at many points within fifteen feet of our works, and these points were the scene of one continual encounter with hand grenades. The loss on both sides from casualties was very serious.

### **PRAISE OF YANKEE ARTILLERISTS**

“Our land front works consisted of one single line of earthworks, running along a continuous ridge from a point about a mile and a half above Vicksburg to about the same distance below, the curve inward increasing the extent of the line from four miles to five miles in all. At short intervals we had little redoubts, or forts, in which light artillery had been placed; but after the first and second days’ experience it became evident to everyone that they were rather an element of weakness than otherwise.

“The enemy, who had access to all the appliances and improvements that science has invented to carry on modern warfare, can boast first class guns, the best of ammunition, and *magnificent artillerymen*. Besides this, they have everything they require in abundance, not to say profusion. For instance, whenever we dared to fire a shot from, say a 12 pounder howitzer, the enemy would concentrate upon it perhaps ten to fifteen 20 pounder Parrott guns, and would maintain a time of perhaps two to three hours’ duration, throwing several hundred shot and shell into, around, or over the offending battery. They fired *with the utmost precision*, and they had attained such an excellent position, and such close proximity, that their rifled projectiles *flew in many cases eight through ten feet of earth*, to strike and burst on whatever might be in the work. *We had no recourse but to run the guns out of the works to keep them from being disabled*, and reserve them to the canister or grape in the event of a charge being made.

“All the ladies and children, inhabitants of the town, resided within the walls, having had no opportunity to escape. Their lot was a dreadful one. Ladies brought up in the lap of luxury, whose slightest wish they had been accustomed to have obeyed as if it was an autocrat’s decree, who had lived in little palaces – as southern houses certainly are – and who had always been surrounded by every luxury that taste, or refinement or wealth could desire and procure, had now to leave their comfortable homes, betake themselves to dark unwholesome caves and caverns dug in the sides of the numerous ‘bluffs’ of the Hill City, sleep on the damp floor, and eat their scanty ration of bacon and pea-bread, and latterly of mule meat, from a plate they’re required to hold, the scanty dimensions of the cave not warranting the luxury of a table.

### FAMINE SETTING IN

“About the thirty-fifth day provisions began to get very scarce, and the advent of Johnston’s relieving force was anxiously and momentarily looked for. Mule meat was the common fare for all alike, and even dogs became in request for the table. Bean meal was made into bread and corn meal into coffee, and in these straits the garrison patiently dragged on the weary length of one day after another under a scorching sun, the stench from the unburied corpses all around alone causing the strongest minded, firmest nerved to grow impatient for the day of deliverance. The enemy pushed their works, they blew up several forts, and with them their entire garrison, and they attempted to charge, but the meagre and famished, yet steadfast, garrison still defiantly held the key of the Mississippi from the ruthless grasp of her northern invaders, and again and again hurled back their formidable columns to the cover of their earthworks. But everything must have an end. General Pemberton learned from General Johnston that he could not afford

him relief, and as the garrison was too famished and reduced to cut its way out, he determined to capitulate.”

The writer says that when the siege began, there were in Vicksburg but ten percussion caps per man.